

The End of 'Home': Heaney, Muldoon and the Return of the Dead

Peter Mackay

For Seamus Heaney, the transition between *North* (1975) and *Field Work* (1979) was a 'turn', a major change of direction signalling and based in the desire not for 'a door into the dark, but a door into the light'.¹ This transition involved fundamental metrical and vocal changes: Heaney took up a longer, more mellifluous line, the 'rhythmic contract of metre and iambic pentameter and long line [which] implies audience', and attempted to use the first-person pronoun to 'mean' himself.² This changed attitude to the line and to language was, for Heaney, 'a shift in trust: a learning to trust to melody, to trust art as reality, to trust artfulness as an affirmation and not to go into self-punishment so much'.³ At the heart of this 'trust' was a deliberate change in attitude to literary tradition (and the art-form as a whole), which was based on a greater assertion of belonging, or in the terms of *North*, 'right' (59).⁴ 'The Ministry of Fear' in *North* – a weave of allusions, echoes and quotations – had been his most complicatedly intertextual poem to date; but it had ended with the poet asserting disempowerment and marginalisation:

Ulster was British, but with no rights on
The English lyric: all around us, though
We hadn't named it, the ministry of fear. (59)

As Neil Corcoran argues, Heaney's use of iambic pentameter in *Field Work* is then a step towards asserting a 'right' on the 'English lyric', or at least an 'open acknowledgement [...] of an allegiance to the English lyric tradition'.⁵

The 'openness' of this acknowledgement is important. *Field Work* features one of the most important self-revisions of Heaney's career: the phrase 'opened ground', which is used as a 'siring' metaphor for the colonisation of Ireland in 'Act of Union' in *North* (44) becomes the 'opened ground' of the first and second 'Glanmore Sonnets' in *Field Work*, in which Heaney attempts to catch a 'voice' 'back off the slug-horn and slow chanter / That might

¹ Seamus Heaney, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber, 2008), p. 194; see Frank Kinahan, 'Artist on Art: An Interview with Seamus Heaney' *Critical Inquiry*, 8.3 (Spring 1982), pp. 404-14.

² James Randall, 'An Interview with Seamus Heaney', *Ploughshares* 5.3 (1979), p. 21. As Bernard O'Donoghue points out, this use of the first-person pronoun is a rhetorical trope rather than transparent access to reality (*Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 74).

³ Kinahan, 'Artist on Art', p. 412. Heaney demurs, in his characteristically nuanced way, suggesting 'I distrust this attitude too, of course' (p. 412).

⁴ Seamus Heaney, *North* (London: Faber, 1975). Page numbers are given in the text.

⁵ Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber, 1998), p. 101.

continue, hold, dispel, appease' (34).⁶ As the first line of the 'Glanmore Sonnets' – 'Vowels ploughed into each other: opened ground' (33) – makes clear, this 'opening' is a linguistic and literary metaphor, a way of combining, and crucially revising different voices (the 'voice' is, after all, caught 'back off' someone else's art). But there is a fear in the collection as a whole that this revision is also consumption, a form of predation: 'An Afterward' identifies the poet with Count Ugolino from Dante's *Inferno*, 'in the ninth circle' of hell, with his mouth fixed onto Archbishop Ruggieri's head, 'tooth in skull, tonguing for brain' (44).

Revision, consumption, predation: in terms of 1970s poetics (rather than in Northern Irish political and historical terms) these themes take us back to the most 'influential' poetic theories of the decade, Harold Bloom's 1973 *Anxiety of Influence*, with its emphasis on poetic influence (and so poetry itself) as a '*misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation*' that is based on '*anxiety and self-saving caricature, or distortion, or perverse, wilful revisionism*'.⁷ In general, there is a tendency to downplay the influence of Bloom's theory on Heaney's poetry (not least by Heaney himself), and to revise it in various ways, as Henry Hart does when he suggests – in a discussion of Heaney and Robert Lowell – that Heaney feels a 'perplexed "anxiety of trust"' rather than the anxiety of influence.⁸ In this essay, I will look again at Heaney's 'turn' into *Field Work* (and especially in the 'Glanmore Sonnets', the sonnet sequence central to the collection) in the light of Bloom's theory, and also alongside the contemporary poetry of Paul Muldoon – especially the sequence 'Armageddon, Armageddon' in *Mules* (1977) and *Why Brownlee Left* (1980) – to suggest that Bloom helped facilitate Heaney's new poetic direction, but that this direction (for reasons Muldoon's poems suggest) was necessarily a dead-end.

First, however, I will return to the poetic reasons that encouraged Heaney to look for a new beginning. As much criticism has suggested, *Field Work* emerges in part out of the impasse that Heaney felt he had reached in 'Exposure' (the final poem in *North*) where he

⁶ Seamus Heaney, *Field Work* (London: Faber, 1979). Page numbers are given in the text. The importance of this revised phrase for Heaney is of course shown by the fact that *Opened Ground* is the title of his 1998 collected poems.

⁷ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* [1973] (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 30; original emphasis.

⁸ Henry Hart, *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1992), p. 123. In the *Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, ed. Bernard O'Donoghue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), the case against Bloom includes critics as diverse as David Wheatley, Dillon Johnston and Neil Corcoran. Even a critic such as Michael Cavanagh, who would acknowledge Bloomian elements in Heaney's work, demurs: 'Heaney might be seen to be in a degree Bloomian, but the oedipal struggle, the warfare, the misunderstanding are not there. Heaney does not usually misread the authors who matter to him' (Michael Cavanagh, *Professing Poetry: Seamus Heaney's Poetics* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), p. 20).

says he has ‘missed / The once-in-a-lifetime portent, / The comet’s pulsing rose’ (67). *North* had (on in its own mythological and metaphorical terms) been Heaney’s most explicit and direct response to the Troubles in Northern Ireland, and as such worked and worried through various different ways of attempting to find ‘images and symbols adequate to our predicament’ or ‘befitting emblems of adversity’ (in answer to the Shakespearean question ‘How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea?’)⁹ If there is exhaustion apparent in ‘Exposure’ (personal, artistic, political, the exhaustion of inspiration and hope), the political climate of the late 1970s offered no respite, as the violence continued after the brief lull of the IRA’s temporary ceasefire in 1975. As the decade wore on, the problem was not only that of trying to find ‘befitting emblems of adversity’, but of trying to find them *again*, of having to repeatedly face a violent conflict that shows no signs of abating. Of the options for poets, silence or innovation, Heaney chose the latter, but the question remained of *how* to innovate.

This question was made more complicated because the pastoral ground that Heaney chose to explore in the ‘Glanmore Sonnets’ was ground that had already been much tilled in Northern Irish poetry, particularly in the question of what could constitute a ‘home’ in the context of a political violence that did not care for distinctions between public and private, or the notion of privacy itself. As Peter Fallon and Derek Mahon suggest in their introduction to the 1990 *Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ‘the word most frequently dwelt on in this selection is probably “home”, as if an uncertainty exists as to where that actually is’.¹⁰ The end of Mahon’s ‘Afterlives’ from *Snow Party* (1975) expresses this problematic relationship between violence and the ‘home’ most succinctly, if not straightforwardly:

Perhaps if I’d stayed behind
 And lived it bomb by bomb
 I might have grown up at last
 And learnt what is meant by home.¹¹

⁹ Seamus Heaney, ‘Feeling into Words’ [originally delivered 1974], *Preoccupations* (London: Faber, 1980), pp. 56-7.

¹⁰ Peter Fallon and Derek Mahon, ‘Introduction’, *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, ed. Peter Fallon and Derek Mahon (London: Penguin, 1990), xvi-xxii: p. xxii. This is perhaps an almost exhausted critical seam; as Edna Longley argues ‘Too much has been made, and too literary of the different ways in which Derek Mahon and Seamus Heaney figure home and history’ (*Poetry and Posterity* [Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2000], p. 305). But home doesn’t go away: for Jefferson Holdridge, in *The Poetry of Paul Muldoon* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2008), ‘home’ as ‘identity’ rather than ‘place’ – rightly or wrongly – is still the framework through which to read Muldoon’s *Why Brownlee Left* (p. 43).

¹¹ Derek Mahon, *The Snow Party* (Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 2. Peter McDonald has explored the different constructions of ‘violence’ in the poetry (and poetry criticism of Northern Ireland) in *Mistaken Identities* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

But the poet might ‘perhaps’ *not* have ‘learnt what is meant by home’, not least because the ‘meaning’ of ‘home’ or indeed of each ‘bomb’ might be constantly changing. Where Paul Muldoon ironized the desire of writing ‘something a little nearer home’ in ‘Lunch with Pancho Villa’ (11),¹² Michael Longley had already begun on what has been a career-long exploration of a ‘home from home’, Carrigskeewaun, which might – or might not – provide an escape from the violence.¹³ The word ‘home’ doesn’t appear in the ‘Glanmore Sonnets’: instead it is a ‘house’, a ‘haven’ and the ‘hedge-school of Glanmore’ (rather than being a ‘Home at Grasmere’) (35, 39, 24). As such, although the sequence is concerned with ‘dwelling’, Heaney is also wary of this being permanent; as the ‘hedge-school suggests’ – and the idea of a ‘haven’ found not in a storm, but in the midst of the shipping forecast – this is a form of ‘dwelling’ primarily in language (in the manner that has since been valorised by Jonathan Bate, with his suggestion, developing the thought of Heidegger and Ricoeur, that ‘our world, our home, is not earth but language’).¹⁴

But it is also a dwelling in literature, through the revision and re-inhabiting of the pressing poetic preoccupations of his peers (in a way that is not, however, a claiming of that territory) and Bloom’s theory offers a possible method for how a poet might engage with poetic tradition, in such a way as to create a ‘space’ or home for themselves within that tradition. One, perhaps unexpected, way that *The Anxiety of Influence* may have been immediately influential is not – as its subtitle suggests – as a ‘theory of poetry’ that explains the revisions and transitions between individual poems, but (if one is willing to engage with or ignore the Freudian, Oedipal, masculinist tendencies of the theory) as a manual for poets, a poetic tool or Eliotic ‘mythical method’. If there is something grandiose about the agonistic struggle Bloom presents, there is also something seductive about it, especially if – as a (particularly ambitious) poet – you jump to the final ‘ratio’ of influence (*apophrades*), to measure yourself (however straight-facedly) against the ‘last phases of Browning, Yeats, Stevens – all of whom triumphed against old age’, and take up the role of ‘[t]he strong poet [who] peers in the mirror of his fallen precursor and beholds neither the precursor nor himself but a Gnostic double, the dark otherness or antithesis that both he and the precursor longed to be, yet feared to become’.¹⁵

¹² Paul Muldoon, *Mules* (London: Faber, 1977). Page numbers are given in the text.

¹³ Michael Longley, ‘The West’, *An Exploded View: Poems 1968-1972* (London: Gollancz, 1973), p. 49.

¹⁴ Jonathan Bate, *Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2001), pp. 250-1.

¹⁵ Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, p. 147. There are perhaps echoes here of Robert Frost’s staring into a well in ‘For Once, Then, Something’, a poem modulated quite differently in Heaney’s ‘Personal Helicon’ in *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) and Muldoon’s ‘The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants’ in *Quoof* (1983). C.f. Rachel

For Bloom, *apophrades* acts through deliberately ‘holding open’ one’s poetry in ways that accepts, and changes the meaning of, the influence of other poems:

the poem is now *held* open to the precursor, where once it *was* open, and the uncanny effect is that the new poem’s achievement makes it seem to us, not as though the precursor were writing it, but as though the later poet himself had written the precursor’s characteristic work.¹⁶

This is relevant to the present discussion because the ‘encounter with the dead’ and especially a Bloomian ‘return of the dead’ (*apophrades*) is the basic metaphor and mechanism of *Field Work* (the most elegiac of Heaney’s collections); the ‘holding open’ of a poem ‘where once it *was* open’ is the strategy of Heaney’s revised ‘opened ground’. The first ‘Glanmore Sonnet’ begins, as we have seen, by combining language and landscape in Heaney’s newly created haven in Glanmore – ‘Vowels ploughed into each other: opened ground’ – and ends by welcoming what comes through this ‘opening’:

‘Breasting the mist, in sowers’ aprons,
My ghosts come striding into their spring stations.
The dream grain whirls like freakish Easter snows. (33)

These ghosts are, primarily, other writers: Dante, Lowell, Kavanagh, Mandelstam, Joyce, Wyatt, Philip Sidney, Shakespeare and, centrally, Wordsworth. Heaney himself has spoken at length about the consonance between Glanmore and Grasmere, and the third sonnet features an identification (and immediate rejection of identity) with Dorothy and William.¹⁷

More important than any individual poetic identification, however, are the full connotations of understanding art as ‘a paradigm of earth new from the lathe / of ploughs’ as the first sonnet suggests (33), especially if that ‘earth’ is the work of previous poets. This can come with some anxiety, in the everyday sense, rather than the Bloomian: if poetry makes of language a ‘nest’, a place to ‘dwell’ (as in the Heideggerian, Batesian model), then the apophradic poet is, on one level, a cuckoo in that nest, with all the anxieties of the interloper. This is the position suggested by the third sonnet, which begins:

This evening the cuckoo and the corncrake

Buxton, *Robert Frost and Northern Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 30, 43, and Stephen James, ‘Dividing Lines: Robert Frost and Seamus Heaney’, *Symbiosis* 3.1 (April 1999), 63-77.

¹⁶ Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 10.

¹⁷ See Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, pp. 101-6 and Heaney, *Stepping Stones*, 197-208. Both Andrew Waterman and Elmer Kennedy-Andrews find that the book is perhaps *too* open to Lowell’s influence: Andrew Waterman, ‘The best way out is always through’, in Elmer Andrews (ed.) *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1992), 23; Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *Northern Ireland Poetry: The American Connection* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014), 96.

(So much, too much) consorted at twilight.

It was all crepuscular and iambic. (35)

Even if this association of poet and cuckoo is knowingly overblown – ‘So much, too much’ – it is not fully negated. Nevertheless, the poem ends with the prospect of an invigorating (Wordsworthian) corresponding breeze: it finishes on the image of ‘a rustling and twig-combing breeze [that] / Refreshes and relents. Is cadences’ (35). This breeze, these cadences (like the ‘ghosts’ of the first sonnet) are reinvigorating: they ‘refresh’ and ‘relent’, with the full meanings of make new, make flexible, and even ‘renew a loan’, a ‘loan’ that knowingly – not under influence or duress – the poem holds open. The holding open of the poem, the encounter with the ghosts, is thus a peering into a dark that becomes a light and the resurrection of the ‘freakish Easter snows’: a recognition of previous poets that becomes a ‘refreshing’.

In Bloomian terms, this attempt to open new ground that allows refreshment can be aligned with the ‘quest romances of the post-Enlightenment’: the quest ‘to re-beget one’s own self, to become one’s own Great Original’.¹⁸ And the sequence offers various originary metaphors of ‘re-begetting’, returns that promise journeys forward: the image of the boustrophedon in sonnet II pictures ‘each verse turning like the plough turned round’ (34); in sonnet IV, meanwhile, there is a travelling outwards that is a journey back:

‘Two fields back, in the house, small ripples shook

Silently across our drinking water

(As they are shaking now across my heart)

And vanished into where they seemed to start. (36)

In the early poems in the sequence this origin is personal, self-centred, self-implicated, with its location in the ‘heart’ (here in sonnet IV) or, as V suggests, in a childhood escape: ‘I fall back to my tree-house and would crouch / Where small buds shoot and flourish in the hush’ (37). What is being proposed in sonnet V is a quest for self-begetting, a return to origins that will be not only ameliorating or healing, but also generative. Often the sequence is read as if this quest has been a success. Neil Corcoran, for example, suggests that Heaney discovers in Glanmore ‘a new point of confirmation and resolution, a firmer ground’; for Andrew Murphy, ‘in the “Glanmore Sonnets” [...] Heaney celebrates his family’s stint of living in County Wicklow with a kind of ease and freedom that “Exposure” signally lacks’; meanwhile, for Alan Gillis, the sequence is ‘infused with spring-seasoned affirmation.

¹⁸ Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, p. 64

Heaney uses the sonnet's compression to press his self-reflective meditations on lyric-sensual plenty into synaesthetic fermentation, in which prosody becomes a sixth sense, conflated with landscape, just as mind and body fuse in word-music'.¹⁹

I would be less positive, however, and suggest that this may be what the sequence sets out to do, but that over its course it falters. In Bloom's quasi-mythical terms, the poet must travel, dually, 'the road back to origins' and the 'road forward to possibility' and overcome 'a demon of continuity' (the 'Covering Cherub') whose 'baleful charm imprisons the present in the past'.²⁰ Which is to say, as Bloom does, that 'discontinuity is freedom', and any path dependent solely on continuity (or 'origins') will not allow the creation of something new.²¹ And when the haven that Heaney tries to create in the 'Glanmore Sonnets' is threatened (by the thought of 'dew on armour and carrion' (40), of meeting 'something blood-boltered on the road' (40) in VIII; or the presence of the black rat swaying 'on the briar like infected fruit' (41) in IX') imagination does not provide the salve; indeed, imagination has perhaps tainted the fruit. This is because in sonnet X, for all its metaphorical reaching to Lorenzo and Jessica, Diarmuid and Grainne, it is not a literary 'refreshing', or return to personal origins, that allows Heaney to discover 'respite' in his dream, but the realization of his wife's presence and separateness, in the memory of their 'first night', their wedding night (42). The 'strange loneliness' (35) of III (in which Heaney compares them to Heaney and Wordsworth then demurs) is 'strange' in part because it isn't entirely lonely. By sonnet VIII – with its imperative 'Come to me quick, I am upstairs shaking. / My all of you birchwood in lightning' (40) – it is not the 'haven' of Glanmore that is providing succour, but his wife; in Corcoran's words – 'the poignant memory of human suffering there [...] is countered with the urgent imperative of sexual desire, as if the one could occlude the other'.²² Certainly, the addressee and focus of the poems has changed from Glanmore, to his wife: where his wife (never named in the sequence) was 'She' in sonnet III, from VIII onwards, she is addressed as 'you'.

This could be seen as the moment in the sequence – perhaps even Heaney's career – at which he shifts from desiring a 'conventional' pastoral that is 'idyllic' or one 'founded in reality' to one that is 'threatened'; or in which he abandons the 'argument' between Edenic

¹⁹ Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, p. 101; Andrew Murphy, *Seamus Heaney* (Tavistock: Northcote, 2010), p. 73; Alan Gillis, 'The Modern Irish Sonnet' *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, ed. Fran Brearton and Alan Gillis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 567-87: p. 579.

²⁰ Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, pp. 36, 39. Cf. Fran Brearton, 'For Father Read Mother: Muldoon's Antecedents', *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*, ed. Tim Kendall and Peter McDonald (Liverpool University Press, 2003), 45-61: pp 54, 58, for the importance of the Covering Cherub – and its opposite, the Sphinx – to Muldoon's poetry.

²¹ Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, p. 39.

²² Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, p. 105.

Georgic and Utopian Eclogue for a relationship to the natural world (and to origins) that is more than literary.²³ Thus, in IX, the poet doesn't find an answer to the question 'What is my apology for poetry?' but instead chases the rat away, and discovers his wife's face 'Haunt[ing] like a new moon glimpsed through tangled glass' (41). By the end of the sequence, it is their 'covenant of flesh' and dewy dreaming faces that provide a 'temporary [...] vulnerable' 'respite'.²⁴ The most important 'ghost' haunting the sequence is not, finally, Wordsworth, but the poet's wife: if 'firmer ground' is located in the sequence, it is not because of the 'opened ground' of sonnet I (and the ghosts that stride through it), or because of the return to a childhood 'tree-house'; the origin that is returned to, and provides 'the road forward to possibility' is not found in the poet's imagination, but in his wife's presence, her body.

There are clear problems with this replacement of literature and the imagination with an objectivised, productive, female body, some of which are revealed (and revised) when read alongside Muldoon's work, in relation to Bloom's theories. Muldoon has, from the dedication to his first collection, *New Weather* (1973) – 'For My Fathers and Mothers' – been toying with ideas of lineage, (il)legitimacy and fosterage. This continued throughout the 1970s: the first and last location of Muldoon's 'Immram' in *Why Brownlee Left* [1980] is 'Foster's pool-hall' or 'Foster's pool-room'; as Tim Kendall suggests, "'Foster's pool-hall" is an updated version of Mael Duin's "fosterage"; like its source (and like much else in *Why Brownlee Left*) 'Immram' is concerned with "pedigree", particularly on the paternal side'.²⁵ Given this emphasis, it is tempting to read Muldoon in Bloomian terms. However, one should be wary of seeing what Muldoon refers to as the 'ghost Bloom' everywhere in his poems, not least because – as Neil Corcoran notes – 'both Heaney and Muldoon have known the theory for as long as it has been around'.²⁶ For Fran Brearton, responding to Corcoran, the *Anxiety of Influence* is 'an enormously seductive text with which to read Paul Muldoon. But its very

²³ Bernard O'Donoghue 'Heaney's Classics and the Bucolic', *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, ed. O'Donoghue, 106-121: p. 119 and Longley, *Poetry and Posterity*, p. 106.

²⁴ Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, p. 106. Gail McConnell's recent *Northern Irish Poetry and Theology* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014) emphasises the ways in which Heaney's use of Catholic terminology – such as the phrase 'covenant' here – should be understood in strictly (if complicatedly) theological as well as metaphorical terms; in particular she argues that because 'Heaney adapts Catholic theology for a secular purpose' much of his poetic positioning – as here – should be understood within the framework of the *imitatio Christi* (p. 84).

²⁵ Muldoon, *Why Brownlee Left*, 38, 47; Tim Kendall, *Paul Muldoon* (Bridgend: Seren, 1996), 84. C.f. Clair Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1998), 80, and also Edna Longley, *The Living Stream*, 170, on the related poem 'Immrama', which in Longley's words 'impugns not only any mythologized purity of family stock, but doctrines of such purity'.

²⁶ Muldoon, *The End of the Poem*, 46. Corcoran, *Poets of Modern Ireland*, p. 130. Corcoran usefully traces Bloomian echoes in Muldoon's poetry, and Muldoon's early comments about Bloom's theories (pp. 124-33.).

seductiveness sends warning signals.’²⁷ The problem with this seduction is that it leads to the creation of more and more fathers and mothers, more and more influences that will be assimilated and (possibly) made to sound like Muldoon:

Muldoon’s habitual self-consciousness about literary-critical approaches [...] applies in this instance too, and that very consciousness, or ‘knowingness’, brought to bear on his thesis-fodder relationship with Heaney, works against Bloom’s own portentousness and dubious gender politics to suggest that the theory itself is being as much parodied as played out.²⁸

I would go further, to suggest that both Bloom’s and Heaney’s portentousness come under (playful) scrutiny in Muldoon’s work, and argue that in important ways there is a conversation between Heaney’s ‘Glanmore Sonnets’ and Muldoon’s poems in *Mules* (1977) and *Why Brownlee Left* (1980), which reveals why the idea of apophradic ‘return of the dead’ that could ‘refresh’ your ‘home’ or origins seems hopelessly optimistic.

For Muldoon’s first sonnet sequence, ‘Armageddon, Armageddon’, displays similar concerns about origins, returns, fertility and the notion of ‘home’ (and with similar anxiety) to the ‘Glanmore Sonnets’. ‘Armageddon, Armageddon’ (the seven sonnets which bring *Mules* to a close) does not show the same ambitious enriching, coarsening innovation of the sonnet present in Muldoon’s next attempt at a sequence, ‘The More a Man Has the More a Man Wants’ (*Quoof* [1983]).²⁹ It does, however, present a complex rejection of rootedness, in which motifs of fertility infertility clash uneasily with the idea of the end of the world, introduced by the punning title that suggests ‘Armagh’, Muldoon’s home county, into Armageddon. Presenting – on one level – the poet’s return to Armagh with his wife from their honeymoon, the sequence is one in which images of ‘returning home’ (and of birth or re-birth) are ironised and rendered by turns fearful, fatal and impossible. In sonnet I any suggestion of fertility turns sour as the honeymoon comes to an end: ‘The light is failing. Our mouths are numb with aniseed, / Her little breasts are sour as Jeanne Duval’s’ (53) (the ‘souring’ of Baudelaire’s mistress’s breasts appears to be Muldoon’s invention). In II, the poet identifies with Oisín, returning to Ireland and dying immediately his feet touch the earth; in III, the introduction of Macha (and ‘The open field where his twins were whelped’ [55])

²⁷Brearton, ‘For Father Read Mother’, pp. 58-9.

²⁸Ibid, p. 51. Brearton rightly cautions against paying excessive attention to the Heaney/Muldoon relationship, pointing out that ‘from 1973 to 1986’ Muldoon’s ‘most immediate poetic relationship was not with Heaney but with Michael Longley’, a relationship she proposes as a ‘counter-myth’ to that of Muldoon’s relationship with Heaney (p. 52).

²⁹ See Gillis, ‘The Modern Irish Sonnet’, p. 568.

suggests not only the fighting of her twins (as metaphor for Northern Ireland), but also the risks of childbirth: Macha died giving birth to her twins.

For Brearton, the focus on the malformed, sterile and infertile in *Mules* (refracting and rewriting as it goes Michael Longley's 'Freemartin') leads to 'the creation of a poetic self that is anything but sterile';³⁰ however, I would argue that the 'fertility' of the poetic self in *Mules* cannot be so certainly assumed. Any attempt to 'return' to origins in 'Armageddon, Armageddon' meets not productive 'origin' but disaster, negation or dissolution. As Clair Wills notes, the sequence is in complex relationship to the first poem in the book, 'Lunch with Pancho Villa', and the imagined revolutionaries advice to 'get down to something true, / Something a little nearer home' (11).³¹ However, when sonnet III does suggest – with typical Muldoonian conditionality – that 'We could always go closer if you wanted' (55), what is offered is the story of Macha, of Swift 'challenging' the Houyhnhnm (an emblem in part of dispassionate, terribly rational procreation), and 'the scene of the Armagh Rail Disaster' (55) in 1889, in which 88 adults and children who were on the Armagh Methodist Church Sunday School Excursion died (although it is unclear if this is to be read as a metaphor for the dangers of train-travel, religion, recreation, Sunday Schools, Methodism, or none of the above). The final rhetorical question 'Why not brave the Planetarium?' (55) abandons the aim of getting 'closer' to get as far away as possible; a return to 'origins' leads to the vastness, distance and emptiness of (a representation of) space; aiming for 'something a little nearer home' leads you to travel mentally as far from home as possible. Unsurprisingly, given this rejection of 'closeness', the sequence as a whole does not permit any redemption, or ameliorating choice for the poet. The final sonnet ends with the poet 'afraid' in a world of fear: it was a 'summer night [...] So dark my light had lingered near its lamp / For fear of it', while in a (parodic?) self-inwoven simile, the poet has gone to fill his kettle 'To a little stream that lay down in itself / And breathed through a hollow reed' (59). The only role that the poet offers himself comes at the end of this poem: 'yon black beetle' lights on his thumb, and the poet 'had to turn my wrist against its wont / To have it walk in the paths of uprightness' (59). To maintain 'uprightness' and order, it is necessary not just to turn the wrist once, but to hold it 'against its wont', and keep holding it – it is the constancy of the pressure, rather than the single, meaningful act (of departure, return?) that is important.

Given the terms just outlined, it is possible to read this final sonnet – and the sequence as a whole – as a response to Heaney's 'Exposure', with its location in the 'last light' of

³⁰ Brearton, 'For Father Read Mother', pp. 54, 58.

³¹ Clair Wills, *Reading Paul Muldoon* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1998), p. 57.

Wicklow, its questioning of the poetic role, and its realisation (with its air of ‘braving the Planetarium’) that the poet has ‘missed / The once-in-a-lifetime portent, / The comet’s pulsing rose’ (67). If this is a response, it is one that Heaney avoids in his 1978 RTÉ review of the collection. Discussing ‘The Mixed Marriage’, Heaney suggests that it is ‘as if the imagination is fathered by the local subculture on the mothering literate culture of the schools’.³² He picks up on the ‘mixed imaginative marriage’ that produces the mule, but not its own sterility.³³ Rather, imagination is – unproblematically – confident, pleasurable and delighting:

Fundamentally, [‘Centaurs’] displays the imagination’s confidence and pleasure in re-ordering the facts of place and time, of history and myth [...] What he has to say is constantly in disguise, and what is disguised is some conviction like this: the imagination is arbitrary and contrary, it delights in its own fictions and has a right to them; or we might quote Wallace Stevens: ‘Poetry creates a fictitious existence on an exquisite plane.’³⁴

Heaney here elides the uncertain and tentative nature of imaginative fertility and fecundity expressed in *Mules*. This is perhaps because this is the problem that remains unresolved in the ‘Glanmore Sonnets’: Heaney’s attempt to create the ‘fictitious existence’ has relied, in the end, on actual, physical reproduction. *Mules* reveals ways in which this is (poetically) problematic, as does Muldoon’s next collection, *Why Brownlee Left*.

The collection’s title poem (again a sonnet), with its pun on ‘brown lea’ (‘opened ground’, in other words), reopens the terrain of the ‘Glanmore Sonnets’. The mysterious Brownlee is ‘last seen going out to plough / On a March morning, bright and early’ (22);³⁵ he leaves, that is, from the world of the first of Heaney’s sonnets. With his unexplained absence, Brownlee leaves behind ‘his pair of black / Horses, like man and wife, / Shifting their weight from foot to / Foot, and gazing into the future’ (22).³⁶ Of course, as the treadmill turns, the horses get nowhere: the ‘gazing into the future’ does not promise that your steps will bring it about. As Elmer Kennedy-Andrews suggests, ‘Why Brownlee Left’ ‘opens up a silence, a space, an interrogation, the Heanyesque grand narrative of rural coherence transformed, transposed and translated into a collection of mysterious traces’.³⁷ The tone of

³² Heaney, *Preoccupations*, p. 212.

³³ Ibid, p. 212.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 212-13.

³⁵ Paul Muldoon, *Why Brownlee Left* (London: Faber, 1980). Page numbers are given in the text.

³⁶ The shifting of weight from foot to foot suggests Heaney’s celebration of Wordsworth in the 1978 lecture ‘The Makings of a Music: Reflections on Wordsworth and Yeats’, for whom ‘[a]s his poetic feet repeat his footfalls, the earth seems to be a treadmill that he turns’ (Heaney, *Preoccupations*, p. 67).

³⁷ Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *Northern Irish Poetry: The American Connection* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014), p. 129.

Muldoon's transformation or translation of the 'Glanmore Sonnets', is uncertain, however (with the horses possible stand-ins for the poet and his wife in Heaney's sequence); but it is clear that the desired rootedness of the Georgic sonnets is satirised as the impossible combination of two different desires or teleologies. The 'road back to origins' cannot become a 'road forward to possibility', although as you 'shift' on the spot you might believe that it is.

Why Brownlee Left also suggests that this return to origins is not only personally dubious, but also politically and culturally. 'History' focuses – like Heaney's tenth sonnet – on a 'first time': 'Where and when exactly did we first have sex?' (27).³⁸ It does, so, however, to erode whatever significance this origin (and its future potentiality) might have. The personal is inscribed onto the historical with a certain comedic poetic afflatus. As Edna Longley has shown, the possible locations (Fitzroy Avenue, Cromwell Road, Notting Hill, Marseilles, Aix, Aquinas Hall)

teasingly evoke Ulster's British connection (Fitzroy, Notting Hill – both a district of London and a location in Belfast), foreign entanglements (the Marseillaise?), and religious oppositions (Cromwell/Aquinas). The cream of the joke is that Aquinas Hall, later a hostel for Catholic women students, was the palace of Anglican bishops of Down, Connor and Dromore when MacNeice's father held that office.³⁹

But the doubled conclusion to the poem ('the room where MacNeice wrote "Snow", / Or the room where they say he wrote "Snow"? [27]) brings it back within the realms of poetic tradition, influence, criticism and gossip. Clearly, the significance of the sexual (or poetic) act cannot live up to what is suggested by the poem: the combination or union of religious and political factions. Implicitly, the poem rejects the opening and closing positions of the 'Glanmore Sonnets'. It ironises the return of the poetic dead while also rejecting the possibility that replacing literary creation with sexual procreation can permit an escape from, or salve to the opened wounds of 'history'. Far from creating a 'refreshing' breeze that reinvigorates the home-place, the holding of the poem open to a precursor undermines any search for poetic (or referential) authority.

Read in this light, then, the 'Glanmore Sonnets', with their trajectory of a return to origins (and the willing acceptance of the 'returned dead' in that origin) were necessarily self-defeating. Bloom's model, when weighted primarily towards a return to origins, can be seen as a poetic dead-end (rather than the return of the dead). This is perhaps no surprise; the

³⁸ As Neil Corcoran and Edna Longley show, there are various responses to *Field Work* and other poems by Heaney in this collection. Cf. Corcoran, *Poets of Modern Ireland*, p. 125, and Longley, *The Living Stream*, pp. 151-2.

³⁹ Longley, *The Living Stream*, pp. 259-60; see also Kendall, *Paul Muldoon* (Bridgend: Seren, 1996), p. 70.

Heaney of *Field Work* does not, after all, well fit the notion of an ‘antithetical’ poet for whom, as Agata Bielik-Robson comments, ‘anxiety becomes a mark of *displacement*, a negative defense of one’s own singularity which refuses to participate in cosmological orderings’,⁴⁰ despite his own exploration of the idea of displacement. He is perhaps more akin to those ‘Critics of a Platonizing kind’ who believe in ‘the benevolence of influence which, in the end, only shows us our right place in the great chain of being’.⁴¹ But if the ‘return to origins’ was a failure for Heaney, the ‘return of the dead’ is not necessarily so. By his next collection, *Station Island* (1984), Heaney has moved off from the idea of a ‘self-begetting’ grounded in a return to origins to the motif of pilgrimage (he is by then poet of ‘Place and Displacement’ rather than ‘the Sense of Place’ to borrow the titles of lectures). Rather than holding a created ‘home’ open and inviting the dead in, he is – developing his interest in Dante from *Field Work*, and replacing Bloom’s anxiety of influence with Jung’s individuation – more intent on meeting the dead face-to-face on the neutral ground of *Station Island*, in the role (to adapt the end of Muldoon’s ‘Immram’) of ‘any other pilgrim’ (47) making his way back to ‘Foster’s pool-room’.

⁴⁰ Agata Bielik-Robson, *The Saving Lie: Harold Bloom and Deconstruction* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2011), p. 37. Cf. Seamus Heaney, *Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry of Northern Ireland* (Grasmere: Trustees of Dove Cottage, 1984).

⁴¹ Bielik-Robson, *The Saving Lie*, p. 37.